Eva Cox on progress

Posted on 30 September 2011

Measuring anything requires us to define it. What then does "progress" mean: development, growth, evolution, civilisation .....?

Eva Cox AO

In defining progress, we need to recognise that human beings are social: we gain our sense of who we are and how we feel through the quality of our connections with other people. Our connections cover both emotional and physical relationships. These links create the complex patterns that are our societies and communities. So how do social beings decide what a good – or even just a *better* – society is, and define what we mean by progress? Society is by definition about these connections.

Current progress indicators often have over-emphasised the material basis of our social system and our individual skills and possessions. There is more to count as we connect through care for each other, and arguments about territory, ideas and access to material goods. So, have those in charge overvalued our economic growth, wealth, ownership of possessions and physical symbols of affluence rather than the quality of our social interdependence? There is little questioning of where we are going socially rather than environmentally or discussions about these benefits and threats to futures. In deliberations on progress, our leaders devote a lot of attention to material and financial changes, but little to the essential aspects of being human. Traditionally defined indicators of progress are too often imbued with macho Western European values that emphasise material change and exchange, but ignore what really matters such as the benefits of relationships, the power of feelings and connections? Is it because these are not defined in the language of commerce, politics or institutional power?

One reason for omitting aspects of social life from measures of progress is that these are harder to measure precisely. Defining human thinking, feeling and doing lacks the simplicity of raising or lowering interest or exchange rates. The OECD Better Life Index illustrates this official prioritisation in the items it picks out for our information and input. It ranks member countries on a range of indicators, with only one, out of nearly twenty, reflecting social/ relational factors. The document introduces this section with the following almost-apology:

Measuring feelings can be very subjective, but is nonetheless a useful complement to more objective data when comparing quality of life across countries. The data can provide a personal evaluation of an individual's health, education, income, personal fulfilment and social conditions. Surveys, in particular, are used to measure life satisfaction and happiness.

The signal is there in the first sentence. Subjectivity is seen as a problem. We humans are deemed to be inadequate reporters of our quality of life. Like many authoritative voices, the OECD assumes we don't know how to constitute our sense of wellbeing; at best, they consider our views to be a complement to the *real* data. Yet, in reality, our subjective views, mixed with reason and data, drive both our feelings and actions.

This macho cultural constraint is an underlying theme in much of the indicator industry. An example is the definition of poverty. Most economists want to define this term by a sum of money, despite evidence that poverty feels relative and comparative (and therefore more subjective) once a minimal survival level is available for food and shelter. Similarly, there is ample evidence we act on the basis of our subjective perceptions, for example we avoid areas with reputations for crime, even if local crime rates are actually low. In many important contexts, the subjective, for example fear, can often be more powerful as a predictor or explainer than the more statistically reliable objective data.

If we want serious social indicators that can help us understand, and perhaps change, our

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future trajectories, we need to add in many more types of measures. These need to include attitudes, feelings and perceptions of social wellbeing that determine what social progress means in the complex patterns of our connected lives.

Progress is an odd concept. The Western industrial revolution changed views of time from seasonally cyclical to linear. Production lines made things, civilisation moves inexorably forward and, in general, the future will be assumed to be better than the past. The belief was that science enlightens us and gives us new technology for controlling those aspects of life that threaten our wellbeing.

This view is different to that of older cultures and social systems that were relatively static and based on traditional responsibilities for the family, community and informal relationships to make societies work. Somewhere along the way we lost sight of the benefits of community and now risk failing to recognise how much of our social wellbeing comes from relationships, feelings and interdependence. Without wanting to turn back the digital clock, I suggest that the quality of our social bonds need to be included in any measures of progress, because they are the basis for trust relationships that make the social (and economic) possible. These are the centre of what makes human society.

As a sociologist, feminist and change-pusher, I read opinion polls and wonder what people are now feeling. The polls show there is now considerable doubt about the assumption that human social progress is inevitable. Science has brought many Frankenstein moments and some technological breakthroughs have become environmental threats. The optimistic era of post-war 1950s believed that change equalled progress; some even promoted utopian possibilities. This set of beliefs drove the social revolutions of the 1960s, but since then the optimism has dissipated and new technology is not necessarily seen as always socially beneficial. There are now more doubts about the supremacy of western civilisation, as we have recognised that many other cultures have different – and legitimate – views about what it is to be civilised.

The emphasis on the market during the eighties produced a very restrictive view that money exchange was the principal marker of human society. This shift reinforced the limited views that overvalued the public spheres of politics, war and markets and ignored the feminised spheres of nurture, family, care and community. This led to definitions of progress as purely economic and excluded the social, cultural and relational aspects of life. This resulted in failing to include their actual value in public funding and policy.

The crudity of gross domestic product as an indicator is a good example, as it only measures traded and tradable goods and services. GDP was roundly attacked nearly 25 years ago by feminist economist Marilyn Waring for failing to count unpaid work. This obviously is a gender issue because the basic economic structure of western societies devalues unpaid work and household production. In less industrialised countries, excluding unpaid work from the calculation means overlooking subsistence farming and goods for home consumption. Omitting these activities distorts measurements of quality of life and access to resources. A system is absurd if it counts people who mind each other's children for payment, but not if they mind their own!

Progress needs to be re-defined by counting much of what has been omitted and maybe lost but can now be recognised as important. Deciding these factors would widen the range of categories we need to measure. As a social scientist and researcher, I used to teach my students that understanding human behaviour needs what I called soft, or subjective measures, because behaviour is too complex to assume simple causes. People act on what they believe is happening, so subjective beliefs and attitudes often offer more powerful measures of wellbeing than what is actually objectively occurring. And interestingly these two kinds of measures don't always correlate. However, politicians require objective data because they see these numbers as voters.

Another example is what is mis-measured in official Closing the Gap data sets. The 'gap' is defined by assuming Aboriginal peoples' progress should conform to our limited inadequate economic measures. What about measuring the gaps in our understanding of what really would improve their lives, such as our lack of understanding of their knowledge, history and cultures? How far do official measures look at their relationships and cultural skills? Progress for Aboriginal communities may be defined as the right to return to some traditional ways of living which have now been taken away.

Progress needs to include much more than the usual 'objective' socioeconomic measures. We need measures of people's agency, the control they feel they have over life decisions

that underpins good health, the feeling of being part of communities, of acceptance and belonging and the ability to live a meaningful life. People should also feel they can dissent, be respected and make a valued contribution. These are all subjective data as they measure feelings and connections, which are difficult to lock into a nice clear table – but represent what often really matters. For instance, how we allocate time is a big factor in the ways we connect, engage in multiple activities and value the benefits of relationships – perhaps that should be a core progress measure?

Increasingly research shows that the way we feel determines much of what we do. This includes our feelings of fairness, trust of others and institutional trustworthiness. Yet these feelings are rarely or minimally measured and have none of the power of indicators like GDP, inflation levels or the number of people who claim this week they are looking for paid work. The feelings listed above are a few possible components of a serious progress indicator based on asking what makes a good life and where we fall short.

Progress indicators should reflect the society we want. The MAP exercise does include a category of family, community and social cohesion, but states that this category lacks headline indicators or time series data. This is where the priority needs to be, as these areas of life are core to our well-being. The rest of the indicators in MAP are often just the means that feed into who we are, how we feel, what we do and why, not the ends.

The views expressed in this opinion piece are the personal views of the individuals concerned and they do not represent the views of the ABS. The intention of this opinion piece is to generate debate and discussion about how Australians view progress. These views will assist the ABS in measuring progress in the future. The ABS continues to be independent and objective.

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Comments

#1 Brendan Griffin
7/10/2011 5:31:02 AM Eva Cox on progress

Economic progress should be measured by the quality of contentment throughout life. Solutions:-

1. More leisure time:- 4 day working week at 40yo, 50yo 3 days and 60yo 2 days.

2. Move away from competition and focus on co operation. People need to work together in the workforce rather than work against their co workers as the individual strives for promotion.

3. Promote honesty and caring society. If we have people with strong moral values then we as a person would take on more responsibilities in relation to our environment.

4. Tribal values seem to work best for a society as all people have a strong sense of belonging and a purpose.

5. The food we eat is of very poor quality and possibly damaging our DNA which could effect future generations. We need to eat food of a higher standard.

6. Governments need to focus on improving lives of the whole population rather than decisions influenced by industries to benefit a select few.

#2 Jim Maclean
7/10/2011 1:28:59 PM Eva Cox on progress

"Any overall assessment about whether life is getting better is unavoidably based on values and preferences."

Eva, the fundamental assumptions represented by this opening statement from the site organisers tells me that the final distillation of all input and statistical accruals will be rather ephemeral and highly subjective. Of not much value at all.

To launch such a concept and not tie it to a reliable anchor and universal reference is to invite a virtual flood of fragmented and disparate comment. How to absorb and make sense let alone chart progress is beyond the power of software.

Are you interested in creating a better baseline reference?

#3 Grant Workman
7/10/2011 6:23:22 PM Eva Cox on progress

I was fortunate enough to catch some of what Eva Cox said in an interview aired on ABC radio early hours of 7.10.2011. Much of what was said was very good but it became great when the point was made that we need to start with the first order question 'what kind of a society do we want?" If we address this point and keep it in focus throughout the process of addressing all issues we will act differently than we would if our central question remains "how can we pay for this?" This latter question empowers bean counters, fuels consumerism and denies space for human creativity about different ways of being. We need to hear more from Eva Cox in forums that enable her kind of thinking to gain real traction

#4 Janet Paisley
9/10/2011 4:51:30 PM Eva Cox on progress

HI Janet,

I thought that you might like to read the Eva Cox article... I relate to what she says so far as Maffra In concerned.

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#5 Michael Laing
3/11/2011 11:30:00 AM Eva Cox on progress

Yes, our connections to family, our home, our sense of belong - being a part of a community etc.. These are the things we truly live for.

Looking back on our lives who would say "I wish I had spent more time at work" or "I wish I had bought more material things (stuff)" or "I wish I had accumulated more wealth"

Lets think more broadly about what really counts - and measure that!

#6 Paul Thomas
14/12/2011 9:45:24 AM Eva Cox on progress

Why is it that, since the 1970s, I have been reading different versions of the comments that Eva makes but there never seems to be any outcomes? Is it that the great majority of people do not agree? Is it that no-one (not even the protagonists) is prepared to address the diffculty of measuring the things that these arguments see as being important? (Eva, where are your lists of changing measures over time?) Or are there powerful vested interests or other evil forces who actively work to prevent the shifting of attention away from themselves and to these so-called 'human' values?

I grow tired of this endless repitition of weakly presented arguments that some-one else should do something about things that the presenter does not like because the 'things' are not what the presenter wants. We all have our own ideas of what is important but hanging around talking about them won't change anything. Actually doing the heavy lifting of developing a set of measures and applying them for several decades would do it. But the vested interests and 'macho' society are unlikely to fund you to do this. So, volunteers, please. Other than sit around talking, what are you, personally, prepared to do to make these changes happen?

Just to be clear, as do most people, I agree with these sentiments, as expressed by Eva and a variety of other people over a period of 40 years. But, I have never seen them as being important enough to disturb my life behaviours significantly. I can extract a perfectly satisfactory life-style from the evil vested interests. So, they would be nice to have but are not a top priority. Because nothing has changed much in the last 4 decades, my attitude has to be that of the majority - and I conclude that the present system works and works well for most people. Why would I put in effort to change a working system just because a few others want to talk about something that morally outrages them.?

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